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ABSTRACT

As part of a larger study (not discussed) ten educated Malaysian citizens were interviewed to find whether their rising political consciousness, over a ten year period (1988-1999), indicated that their transformation was influenced by their culture. The subjects were between 35-45 years old, married, with an average of four children. All were members of the majority race, Malay, and held membership in the United Malay National Organization (UMNO), the biggest political party in Malaysia. The following research questions guided the study: (1) What triggered individuals' transformations; and (2) what facilitated the transformation to occur. Voting patterns in the 10th General Election of 1999 were meshed with interview transcripts. Two themes emerged from the data: (1) abhorrence of political scandals and upheavals during 1998-1999; and (2) a feeling of being intellectually demeaned (lied to by government authorities). The major conclusion of the study was that a political event could trigger perspective shifts and lead to transformative learning if it is perceived as threatening to the communal cultural identity. A second conclusion was that the methods used to handle the national crisis were against participants' cultural and religious values. The researchers believe the study contributed to theoretical explanations of transformative learning among individuals in a developing country. (The bibliography lists 28 references). (AJ)

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Rising Political Consciousness: Transformational Learning in Malaysia

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Abstract: The qualitative study on ten educated Malays with regard to their rising political consciousness indicated that their transformation is influenced by their culture. Political events can trigger perspective transformation if they are perceived as threatening to one's communal cultural identity. The findings suggest that cultural values and religious beliefs facilitate perspective transformation.

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After more than four decades of Independence from colonial rule, Malaysia is poised to plunge ahead in its quest towards becoming a developed nation by the year 2020, as envisioned in the Vision 2020 (V2020). The achievement of the V2020 would purportedly elevate the status of Malaysia to that of a developed nation, albeit in its very own unique mould (Gomez & Jomo, 1999). The rapid movement to modernize Malaysia follows it's bloodless struggle for Independence in 1957 (Welch, 1967). Much like other colonized countries, it was the Malaysian elite who paved the road towards Independence (Means, 1991). Except for a brief period in 1969, when racial clashes erupted, the modernization of Malaysia was relatively smooth flowing. In addition, with a steady economic growth in the 70s, 80s and early 90s, it was apparent that the masses, especially the ethnic Malays, were happy with the direction taken by the government. This was clearly reflected in the results of the general elections, which was held every 5 years. Prior to the 10th General Election, the governing coalition party was returned to power with a resounding majority each time.

This rosy picture was shattered by the Asian Economic Crisis that began in 1997. The crisis spread like wildfire and devastated many countries in the region. Malaysia, after years of remarkable rates of economic growth, suffered her worst economic crisis with collapsing currencies and plunging stock market (OTN, 1998). The crisis brought together with it many social, economic, and political events that shook various facets of life in the country (Gomez & Jomo, 1999). Among them were the collapse of many business entities, the removal of the then Deputy Prime Minister (DPM) from active politics, and the pegging of the local currency to the US dollar. During this period, for the first time, thousands of people took to the streets demanding for reforms and hundreds were arrested each week. The results of the 10th General Election (GE) held in the aftermath of this debacle showed that the people, especially the ethnic Malays, had significantly changed their political allegiance. Why did these people reacted the way they did? How was their reaction towards the events like? What was significant about the changes they went through? This paper presents part of findings of a larger study to explore the learning process of people who experienced a perspective transformation in the aftermath of the economic turmoil in Malaysia in 1988. The purpose of this paper is to garner in-depth understanding about the event that trigger the perspective transformation experienced by them. This paper deliberates on the following research questions: 1) what triggered the perspective

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transformation among the selected individuals? and 2) what facilitated the perspective transformation to occur?

Theoretical Framework

According to Imel (1998), the way people choose to vote is influenced by their meaning structures or frame of reference. Changes in meaning structure occur when individuals experience a transformative learning process. Transformative learning is the process whereby adult learners critically examine their beliefs, assumptions, and values in light of acquiring new knowledge and begin a process of personal and social changes (Mezirow, 1978). The catalyst of perspective transformation can be adisorienting dilemma – a particular life event or life experience that triggers an acute internal/external crisis or an "integrating circumstances" – which occurs after an indefinite period of conscious or unconscious searching of something that is missing in life (Clark, 1991, pp.117-118).

Mezirow (1991) explained that when a radically different and incongruent experience cannot be assimilated into the meaning perspective, it is either rejected or the meaning perspective is transformed. Taylor (1998), upon analyzing Mezirow's idea, wrote:

> A transformed meaning perspective is the development of a new meaning structure. This development is usually the result of a disorienting dilemma due to a disparate experience in conjunction with the reappraisal of previous assumptions and presuppositions (p.7).

The way adults respond to their world have been explained by various perspectives of adult development through concepts such as generativity (Erikson, 1982), seasons (Levinson, 1986), and faith (Fowler, 1981). Bee's (1996) metaphorical description of the middle age as the sun, radiating its own light to shine on others is particularly illuminating to the study.

Research Design

The nature of the study calls for the employment of the qualitative methodology. Mumbay (1984) clarifies that qualitative methods address the uniqueness of an individual within a particular situation and period. The lack of theory or an inadequately fitting of theory to a phenomenon is usually the reason for conducting a qualitative study. In the case of this study, no research has yet been conducted to explore the perspective transformation as experienced by Malaysians. In this study, the samples are ten educated Malay individuals who live or work in the Klang Valley, where the capital city Kuala Lumpur is located. Malays are chosen to be the subject of the study because they are the majority race in the country, comprising 60 percent of the population. As such, they also have the biggest number of electoral voters (Political Analysis Bureau, 2000). Their age ranges between 35-45 years old. All are married with an average of four children.

Politically, the United Malay National Organization (UMNO), the party representing the Malays, is also the biggest political party in Malaysia, and has been the backbone of the coalition government that has ruled Malaysia since Independence. As such, UMNO is the most powerful party that often directly influences the direction of the nation. With Malays as its support base, changes in the manner of voting or political alliances of the Malays could effectively impact the nation's future direction. Thus, it is paramount for this study to explore the changes that are being felt by individuals within the Malay communities.

The reason for choosing educated individuals is because this group of people often shy away from being in mainstream politics and has to be coerced into joining a political party

with promise of handsome rewards before they would eventually join (Wariya, 1993). However, the tenth GE saw active political involvement among educated Malays, especially those working with the government (Utusan Malaysia Online, 1999). Klang Valley was chosen because the intensity of the turmoil was most strongly felt here than in other places (Pillai, 2000). This could be seen in the vote swings, which indicated tremendous changes taking place in the Klang Valley.

For this study, a snowballing sampling technique was employed to choose a sample. This technique is deemed most appropriate because the researcher cannot determine which individuals had experienced rising political consciousness unless he was informed about it. Furthermore, the study also touches on issues deemed sensitive in the country. In order to be selected as an informant an individual who reportedly experienced perspective transformation must satisfy one of the following criteria. During the period of the turmoil until the voting day, he/she must have done any of the following: (1) changed membership of political party, (2) did not discard party membership, but voted for the opposing party, (3) applied to be registered as a voter, something never done before despite being eligible, or (4) became actively involved in election campaigns, something which was never done before.

The primary data collection was in the form of semi-structured interviews to solicit information from the informants. According to Merriam (1998), an interview is necessary when we cannot observe behavior, feelings or how people interpret the world around them. For this study, the turmoil was at its height in 1998, while the election took place in November, 1999. The first interview was conducted in January 2000, nearly two years later. The interviews were conducted in a mixture of both English and Bahasa Melayu, languages commonly spoken by the urban educated Malays, were taped and later transcribed verbatim. Besides the interviews, the researcher also collected relevant documents on issues, views and news related to the turmoil. These include magazines, political party's newspapers, books, and online materials. Documents offer a rich source of information (Patton, 1990). The researcher employed a more traditional approach parallel to the cut-and-paste method during data analysis. In order to make meaning of the interview transcription and other documents, the researcher used the constant comparative method of analysis (Glazer and Strauss, 1967).

In the larger study, questions were asked concerning the participants experienced in taking part in the 10th GE. Further probing was carried out to solicit reasons as to why their actions and feelings were relatively different than during the previous GEs. Inductive analysis revealed themes related to the trigger event necessary for a perspective transformation, and pointed to factors facilitating it to occur.

Findings and Conclusions

Two themes emerged from the data: (1) abhorrence to the handling of the issues related to the sacking of the ex-DPM, and (2) feeling of being intellectually demeaned. The findings revealed that the informants could not accept that the ex-DPM was guilty as alleged. They interpreted the allegation as being too much, unacceptable, unproven, unbelievable, fabricated, ridiculous, outrageous, preposterous, rubbish, and a political ploy. As for the treatment received by the ex-DPM, they felt it was unacceptable especially when used against a person who once held a high public office. They felt that the treatment was inhuman, unfair, wrong, lack decency, unimaginable, and unfair. These categories are grouped under the first theme, that is, abhorrence with issues surrounding the sacking of the sacked DPM.

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The findings also showed that the informants felt the actions undertaken by the authority in dealing with the crisis demeaned them intellectually. Specifically, the participants felt that they were lied to, treated as fools and that their intelligence was insulted. To them the official explanation provided by the authority with regards to the event indicated that the issue was religiously wrong. They had to make the necessary leap towards becoming more politically conscious since it was perceived as the right way to respond.

Political event can trigger a perspective transformation.

The major conclusion of the study is that a political event can trigger perspective transformation. Participants in the study revealed that they had experienced a disorienting dilemma as a result of having to deal with issues surrounding the sacking of the ex-DPM. One participant related that he was having dinner with a friend at a food stall when the news came on the television. He said: "I did not really hear it as I was facing the other way…And at that time my wife called me through my mobile. "DPM was sacked" she said something like that. I was startled and confused, and I started asking my friend, "Is it true?"… I felt something wrong with it. After that my mind immediately switched. Yes, the sacking trigger me to switch my mind" This concurs with the notion of a disorienting dilemma as identified by Mezirow (1978). According to Mezirow (1996) often these experiences are stressful and painful and can threaten the very core of an individual's existence. One participants claimed that: "That means, the hope that I had before was just a mirage, you see…just a mirage." Again, this is also in line with another finding by Clark (1993) that another condition necessary for triggering change is internal disillusionment whereby the individual recognizes that previous approaches and solutions are no longer adequate. In this case, an external event had impacted the participants by triggering the dilemma and act as catalyst to transformative learning. This is in line with the finding by Scott (1991) that an external event can provoke an internal dilemma.

The event, which saw the sacking and the subsequent treatment of the ex-DPM, was something that the participants had never observed in the history of Malaysian politics. Although the authority chose to treat the issue as moral, that is, social issue, but to the participants it was political. One participant reiterated this stand:

> This was what I told other people, if you really want to kick him out for political reasons, by all means kick him out and gave the political reasons for it, or just said "this is politics" and that would be enough. But the thing was they tried to cover the issue by giving this sort of stories that was so illogical.

Similarly, analyses done by Gomez and Jomo (1999) on the issue of the sacking also supported the notion that it was political. They wrote: "For most observers, regardless of their sympathies, *the DPM's* fate is seen as due to the threat he posed to *the PM* by offering a viable and attractive alternative and by apparently seeking to accelerate the succession" (p. 201, emphasis added). Thus, the finding suggests that the sacking of the ex-DPM is political in nature.

Further analysis of the trigger event revealed that culture consideration is imperative. One participant who could not believe the allegation was utterly appalled by the fact that the allegation came from people of her own race. She said: "I think it would be better for you to just kill him off, rather than accuse him of such a crime. I could not imagine a Malay, a Muslim would concoct such stories, that was very bad." For a better understanding of the event, the reader has to take note of the fact that issues waged in almost every general election in Malaysia were always cultural in nature. For example, the Chinese than the Malay will always treat issues on education with greater concern because to them, the way of preserving their cultural identity

in Malaysia is through Chinese schools where Chinese language and customs are practiced. Any move that is viewed as threatening to the existence and practice of Chinese schools will be vehemently opposed and quickly turned into a political issue. The Malays, on the other hand, are more attracted to issues related to religion, since the religion of Islam gives the Malays in Malaysia their identity (Abdullah, 1996). Similarly, they too will vehemently oppose any move that is seen as threatening to Islam as it signifies a threat to their cultural identity. Since they perceived the ex-DPM as a leader who upholds Islamic values, they were hoping for him to lead Malaysia and thus effectively strengthen their cultural identity. Thus, his removal from public office was seen as detrimental. Therefore, these evidences suggest that a political event can trigger perspective transformation if it is perceived as detrimental to ones communal cultural identity.

Cultural values and religious beliefs facilitate the perspective transformation.

The findings indicate that the crime the ex-DPM was accused of and the way it was publicized were outrageously against the participants' cultural values. One participants lamented that: "I can see the violation of all the Islamic principles, all the human principle that I uphold all the while were being trampled by the authority." The position taken by another participants vividly explains the cultural influence:

> Of course it had nothing to do with me, but it has everything to do with my religion. So if it is related to religion, there is a Malay proverb that say "if you pinch the right thigh, the left thigh can feel the pain" *(Cubit peha kanan, peha kiri rasa sakit juga)*. Don't tell me not to give a damn about it, it is my religion that they made fun of. That is what I care about. It is like, you don't eat what they cook, but even if the aroma of the cooking reaches you and you smell it, then you have sinned. You cannot say, oh this is other people's problem, this is their house, their kitchen, and they can cook and eat to their heart content. No, you cannot have such attitude. We are living in a community…even if you cannot afford to do anything; you've got to empathize with it.

According to Abdullah (1996), to the Malay, the concept of preservation of face *(jaga maruah)* is important in maintaining social harmony. Abdullah stresses;

> Face means maintaining a person's dignity by not embarrassing him as an individual. It is most closely associated with shame, which could lead to a loss of one's family honor. As the individual is part of a family or a group, to embarrass him would also bring about shame to his group, family and community (p.30).

The participants also saw the manner the ex-DPM was treated as against their religious principle, since public shaming of a person, let alone a leader in a high social position, is unacceptable in their religion. Furthermore, for the majority of the participants, the ex-DPM, a respected Malay leader, is seen as someone who embodies the spirit of their religious beliefs. To them the issue is also religious. "He symbolizes all the beliefs that I have about my religion" confessed one participants who appropriately profess the sentiment shared by other participants. Therefore, these evidences indicate that the cultural values and religious beliefs facilitate the perspective transformation as experienced by the participants.

Implication to theory and practice

This study contributes toward theoretical explanations of transformative learning among individuals from a developing country. These individuals live in a different environment

marked by different cultures, worldviews, values and norms. Presently, the literature on transformative learning has been mainly from the perspective of individuals or groups of individuals from developed countries. Generally, this perspective does not take into account the differences associated with individuals from less developed country. The study can help to explain the role of triggering events that act as a catalyst for transformative learning. Different individuals may exhibit unique trigger events that could be influenced by their previous experience. As such, cultural differences may play crucial roles in transformative learning.

Analysis on empirical research that use Mezirow's framework (Taylor, 2000) indicated that there is yet to be an empirical study on perspective transformation within the context of apolitical event. Furthermore, although context and culture are known to influence perspective transformation, very little is known about how culture plays its part.

Closing

This study on ten educated Malays in Malaysia shows that a political event is capable of triggering perspective transformation if is perceived as threatening to the communal cultural identity. The participants' cultural values and religious beliefs could facilitate the perspective transformation.

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